Stereo Boy

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Stereo Boy

by iridiumcarp

Summary

He wasn’t bound to relationships anymore— or, at least, he didn’t let himself be bound by them. The suffering of love was stronger than the comfort of it.

Five years later, two worlds collide once again.

Chapter 1: In The Past

Chapter Notes

> i apologise for any mistakes made in the writing, this was not beta read. enjoy!

"You don't have a home until you leave it, and then, when you have left it, you never can go back."

— James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room

5 years later

There was a park in Northwest Philly that ran along the Schuylkill River, dense with tall sycamores and littered with ballparks, bronze statues of men atop horses, and wide amphitheatres. When Isaiah was eleven, his parents took him on a day-trip to Philadelphia, and, after a long day of regular sightseeing and shopping, they strolled through the park at a leisurely pace. It was mid-fall then, and the leaves were aflame with vibrant scarlet red. Yet, despite the vast beauty of the scenery, they were the only people there. It felt comfortably lonely in a way, and special; that they were the only ones given the opportunity to see the wonders of nature's shift into hibernation.

They had sat on the dry grass, leaning back on their hands as they watched the sun droop down into the horizon. Isaiah's mom had ruffled a hand through his hair and smiled when he scrunched his nose up at her. The sky bled the same color as the trees; a ruby sea meeting the orange sands of a faraway island in the heavens. He had never felt that immense flush of peace in his life since then.

Isaiah sat on a cold bench fourteen years later in that same park, escaping the stuffiness of his apartment filled with family members he hadn't seen in years.

He had begun to understand his love for fall years ago, when the air got chilly before winter blew in and the trees were beautiful oil paintings he didn't have to buy a ticket to see. But the trees were barren now, husks of their forefathers. The sky was grey, clouded over with thick cotton, and the white, setting sun, hidden behind the misty curtain, tried to peek through with its weak, thin rays.

Isaiah's breath came out in cloudy puffs, warm against his hands when he brought them to his mouth.

There was a group of three sitting on the frosty grass a hundred feet away; two women and a young boy. One of the women was hugging the boy tightly, tousling the fur of his winter coat and laughing as he squealed with uncontained joy, while the other watched with a soft gaze and an apparent love for the both of them.

Isaiah quickly looked away, back to the darkening sky, when his chest started aching and he began to believe in impossibilities.

He'd have to go back to his house soon, and face the questions of his prying aunt and the undeniable look of knowing from his mom. He fucking hated Christmas with all of his being, which didn't say much, because he hated every other holiday — except for Halloween. He liked Halloween. But his family's Christmas was the opposite of simple corporate soullessness that Halloween strived for; home cooked meals, old decorations made by prattling children, the flood of another language filling each space, a special kind of warmth permeating the hardwood floors of a two-bedroom townhouse.

Even if it was some people's dream to experience that overwhelming, familial love, Christmas irked Isaiah to discomfort.

He couldn't explain it, he probably would've never been able to explain it, but that's just how he felt.

The tremendous love and care he had for his family stopped at his mom and dad, and tapered off beyond them. Maybe it was because he wasn't that close with the rest of his family, only having seen them in passing moments at holidays or gatherings.

Strangely, many people Isaiah knew loved their distant family, like his coworker who praised his relatives beyond his wife and parents like they raised him too. Isaiah didn't understand why he had to feel love for people he happened to share blood with.

The ten minute walk back to his house was quiet, though the songs of drowsy birds, the rumble of car engines, and the breeze's whistle as it blew over mounds of fresh snow broke the harmless silence. Isaiah clutched his coat tighter against his shivering, goosebumped skin, beating off rogue wisps of chilly wind that sought to freeze him to death as he trekked back.

The houses he passed by on his street were lit with orange glows,

curtains clipped back so the doting families inside could watch the snow fall on their sills as they readied for Christmas Eve.

The brick of the townhouse he rented was familiar to the eye, calming him with tired relief from the cold as it came into view. But, what came along with that warmth was a hot, spitting irritation. Standing outside, a few feet from the stairs, he could already hear foreign chatter, the yells of bickering children he barely knew, and the plucked strings of a Plena song he couldn't name.

Isaiah felt broken, the way he couldn't find peace in the simplicity of familial comfort; that he couldn't rest when his body and mind yearned to still and accept domestic niceties. Shouldn't he have wanted that? The love of family?

He exhaled and trudged up the stairs, pushing open the unlocked front door, and stepping into the enveloping warmth of a full house. As he shucked his coat off, he glanced around the house that was once neat.

Still he resented the tradition that every Christmas in the Nash family was celebrated at a different home each year. Isaiah had a new job and a new home in a new city, so the responsibility naturally fell to him. His house wasn't small by any means, but it certainly wasn't large enough to harbor a rowdy group of eight.

He'd given up his own bedroom to his mom and dad of course— he had no qualms in doing that—, and the guest room to his aunt and uncle, which meant he was stuck in the living room where the floor was covered by scratchy mattresses and thick blankets for two kids and him. His great-uncle, from his mom's side, had taken the couch selfishly, but Isaiah did understand that the old man's back issues had gotten worse over the years, so some mercy was given in that respect.

The kitchen was messy and loud. Isaiah's aunt— his dad's sister— was in the midst of teaching his mom how to properly double fry the plantain until golden perfection, while his aunt's husband pulled a pot of creamy arroz con dulce off the stovetop. The radio on the windowsill blasted Reggaeton like it wasn't almost seven in the evening. But it was the night before Christmas Eve, so who really cared?

Isaiah's mom pulled out the last batch of plantains, shaking them out over the hot oil before dumping them unceremoniously on a paper towel. She turned ever so lightly, and broke into a grin as she noticed Isaiah standing awkwardly by the door.

“Honey,” she drawled as she placed down the tray. She walked over and extended her arms into an expected gesture of embrace. “Where were you?”

Isaiah wrapped his arms around his mom and hugged her. “Went for a walk,” he muttered against her shoulder where he pressed his cold-bitten cheek.

“You doing okay?” She asked quietly, rubbing a hand up and down his back, soothing him like he was a child again and had scraped his knee on the road.

For Isaiah to move on from inconsequential things, he learnt to ignore them. Was it healthy? Not at all, but he found he had stopped dwelling on things that happened years ago. When someone asked if he was okay, he only had one answer.

He straightened up and nodded. “All good.”

“Okay,” she said as if there was something not okay. Her hand squeezed his arm through his knitted sweater. “Come help me take out the flan.”

The rest of his evening was spent preparing food that needed to set overnight, like the flan or the marinating pernil, or snacks they’d eat during their third rewatch of The Muppet Christmas Carol.

When Isaiah had just placed the Saran-wrapped flan in the fridge, his dad stomped into the kitchen, growling about the local pasteles seller not having enough for them all.

“Who made the coquito?” His dad asked, glancing around the kitchen for the, usually two litre, glass bottle of creamy alcohol. Isaiah’s mom groaned and shooed him out, cursing him out under her breath as Isaiah’s aunt screeched with laughter.

Despite Isaiah’s dad heralding from Puerto Rico, they rarely celebrated in kind. He’d heard that, traditionally, they celebrated la Navidad for over a month. Mercifully, his dad’s side had lived outside of Puerto Rico long enough for the traditions to taper off into the plainness of American practice. That didn’t mean his dad was completely cut off from his culture: ceramic frogs on the pine tree; pavas placed atop the men’s— including Isaiah’s— heads; little baby Puerto Rican Jesús in the nativity scene on the fireplace's mantel; dinner on Nochebuena where everyone spoke over the stereo whilst passing heavy dishes of

prepared food.

Over a plate of garlicky pernil, his mom's Gullah okra soup, and arroz con gandules cooked with red rice, Isaiah found himself wanting to share this with someone else– not just his family, but someone who had never experienced this before. Seeing the brightness of hunger in their eyes, glinting into drunkenness as they kept drinking sweet coquito while wrapped under Isaiah's arm, the lights of the Christmas tree twinkling across their skin in a crude reflection.

He glared down at his full plate with a painful pang of morbid loneliness. He rarely thought about those kinds of things most days; he knew it was something he shouldn't have been thinking about, but, like everything else, it advanced without invitation and seemed to make his heart ache with early onset blood pressure.

"Izzy, pass the greens," his great-uncle said with a grabby hand gesturing towards the white bowl. Isaiah pushed them over with the butt end of his fork, physically holding himself back from looking at his mom and finding an indescribable expression on her face. He'd noticed it from the corner of his eye twenty minutes into dinner, and couldn't shake it.

He had been skillfully evading questions, but at every Christmas there was a time where one must be asked about their life. It was inevitable, the way of the world, how it kept spinning; invasive questions from family members one barely knew were the magnetism that held Earth in the sun's grasp.

"So, Isaiah," his aunt started with a gentle smile. "How are you doing?"

Isaiah shrugged, pushing chunks of okra around on his plate before scooping some up and shoving it into his mouth so he had an excuse not to answer. Flavour burst across his tongue, tangy and spicy, but it didn't stop his aunt.

"How's work?" She asked.

"It's okay," he mumbled, eyeing his uncle feeding six year old Mateo who was squirming around in his seat and babbling about nonsense.

"I'm sure you've met some nice people there."

He knew where her line of questioning was going, and just as he opened his mouth to shut it down, his mom spoke.

“Let’s not bother him with that kind of talk,” which really meant there’s no one, and there probably won’t be anyone, so don’t expect it.

She wasn’t exactly wrong.

Isaiah hadn’t been with anyone since that year in his distant memories. Some guys called it a rut, some women felt bad for him, but he didn’t really care. There was no innate desire to invite a man home and desperately fuck into him until they both couldn’t breath, nor buy a pretty woman a drink and give her sweet company for the night and maybe the following morning. He checked people out, he kissed girls in the back of clubs when he was drunk enough, he talked to guys he was absolutely sure weren’t straight, but he didn’t foster anything further than that.

His mom wasn’t worried about it, he could tell, but sometimes she asked him over the phone about who he was seeing, and it was less awkward to tell her there was no one on the basis that he didn’t want to date than it was to tell her he was heartbroken five years ago by a boy who ran away to join the Marines.

In all honesty, he couldn’t fathom giving someone that trust ever again.

Maybe his mom understood all those years ago when he hugged her and didn’t let go, even as his tears soaked her shirt. Maybe she saw that aching kind of yearning in his eyes, and could tell that something had gone deeply wrong through his wet cries.

Yet if she knew, she never said anything. He was thankful for that, because without her quiet care, he probably wouldn’t have made it through his first year of college. It was rough. He went to sleep at four AM every day, woke at seven, went to his morning classes, and then studied in his room until it was time to repeat the cycle. His roommate — a bio-med valedictorian — hated him, and Isaiah kind of hated himself as well. Not for fucking up his sleep schedule so bad it took a year and twenty bottles of melatonin to fix, or for purposefully failing his Intro to Business class because the teacher was prissy about assignments, but for letting something as trivial as a boy break his heart, and then letting that pain leech into his everyday life.

When he started working though, things seemed to settle. With his Bachelor’s in Political Science, and a sneaky foot in the door through his dad’s connection with one of the council members, Isaiah was able to get a job for the city of Philadelphia in Human Resources. It was

honest work, and he barely dealt with employee complaints than he did interviewing possible employment candidates — he was expecting mere workplace drama, but, after a while, he was glad there wasn't any. He didn't think he could handle that kind of bullshit on top of his already mind wracking problems.

The conversation had continued on when he hadn't been focusing, moving onto his great-uncle's writing course. Isaiah poked at the tender pernil, watching the meat fall apart on the prongs of his fork, but his mouth didn't water at the sight of it like when he was a kid and pernil was a delicacy in his household.

By the time the speciality bottle of rum had been cracked open, Isaiah's cousins were sent to get changed for midnight mass. Isaiah's aunt couldn't find a Puerto Rican church close enough that was holding mass, and so they had to go to the next best thing— the American Catholics.

After two— maybe three— shots of rum, Isaiah dressed quietly in his room. The stifling sound of rustling fabric and his feet against the wood floors dimmed the downstairs hum of conversation and the clinks of glasses. The yellow light from his lamp basked the clothes in his closet in warmth. The button-up shirt he wore to work, once white, was yellow in the lamp light, pale like a fresh daffodil.

He tore his eyes from it and quickly pulled out a black button-up and a pair of slacks before slamming the closet door shut.

Some things he didn't need to think about, some things weren't as relevant as they once were.

He dressed into his change of clothes and brushed his teeth in the dim bathroom, avoiding any eye contact with the man in the mirror.

It took about forty minutes for everyone to trudge downstairs, swaddled in thick coats and scratchy scarves. Isaiah's oldest cousin, Sofia, pulled at the brim of her beanie with a frown. She rarely talked, but when she did, she and Isaiah had hour long conversations about nothing and everything. Her intelligence was astounding, and he wished she'd see that herself.

Mateo, held in his father's arms, glared at Isaiah through the fur of his coat. Isaiah wasn't sure what he had done to piss off a six year old, but it couldn't have been anything too insulting.

They left at eleven, Mateo yawning his dissent at being up so late.

Isaiah silently agreed, the cold biting at the inches of exposed skin made him tired and his steps sluggish. The rum hadn't helped either.

Making it to the church just in time, they sat down near the back in an empty row. The rest of the crowd sat up near the front, women and men with their children in their laps or by their side. He wondered if they were filling their church attendance quota too, just like his family. His mom took his hand, clutching the sides of his palm tightly and squeezing it every so often.

The priest droned on, the hum of his dreary voice bounced off the church's high walls. He talked about things that didn't interest Isaiah, or anyone else for that matter. An old man sitting in the pew a few ahead was slumped over, no doubt sleeping. Isaiah stifled his snort with a cough, and his mom glared at him momentarily. Sofia turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow— how could a seventeen-year-old look so much like his mother with a single expression? It nerved him and he shot Sofia a look— a deep, childish pout— that she smiled at.

As mass neared its end, families with younger ones started standing and quietly shuffling out. One of them, up the very front by the sanctuary, were two men and a woman holding a tired young girl in her arms. Isaiah had barely noticed them during mass, just another family like his, but he perceived them now.

The youngest of the two men, who Isaiah had to guess was the son, had shoulders as broad as a rumbling river— his white shirt stretched over the ridges of his traps. Flat, brown hair draped over his head, curling ever so slightly at his nape where his olive skin freckled. As he stood with the rest of his family, Isaiah could map the line of his spine through his shirt— muscles like wings across his back.

He looked away from the man as the family walked down the aisle. But his body betrayed him, forcing a singular, reluctant glance up, and he locked eyes with him. The guy nodded an easy greeting in passing, and Isaiah hesitantly returned it.

Isaiah ignored the eyes boring into the side of his head— he already knew it was Sofia when he heard her shy snicker as he shot her a glare.

When mass finally finished, they made their way back to Isaiah's place. The early morning of Christmas Eve was a quiet affair, and the streets reflected that; complete, utter silence that rang its absence in Isaiah's ears.

His dad and his aunt started to quietly chatter. Isaiah understood half the words they spoke— tiredness and his freakishly abysmal Spanish proficiency limited his ability to translate the words into English. Sofia's head was down, but Isaiah could tell she was listening.

Once they had gotten back, Mateo and Sofia were ushered to change into their pyjamas while the adults retired to the kitchen table. His mom looked at him with a wordless offer, but Isaiah didn't think he could handle drinking any more rum and being asked questions he'd rather die over than answer. He shook his head at her with an apology and went to shower and change instead.

He took his time in the shower, shuddering off images of that guy from church with ice cold water, and slowly put more comfortable clothes on. Going downstairs, he slid past the kitchen without anyone noticing him, and stepped into the living room. Lit by the soft yellow of a table lamp, Mateo and Sofia were sitting on the mattresses, hunched over the Game Boy in Sofia's hands.

"You guys are still up?" Isaiah groggily asked before splitting into a yawn.

Sofia glanced over her shoulder, and Mateo snatched the gameboy from her hands.

"Give it back," she hissed, pulling at his fingers.

Isaiah snorted and slumped down onto the mattress shoved up against the wall.

"Go to sleep, please," Isaiah grumbled, rubbing his palms over his brow, digging his heels into his eyes until the darkness spotted with blue dots. He knew he had no sway over his cousins, and, ultimately, it was their choice whether they listened to him or not.

"I want to finish this—," Mateo's voice broke with a yawn, hands going limp enough for Sofia to grab her Game Boy back. "Hey!"

"Listen to Isaiah." She said, crawling over to her rucksack and shoving the Game Boy in it. "We open presents tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay…"

Isaiah heard the lamp click off and the two of them settle into their makeshift beds. Mateo's loud breathing evened out into sleep— and then Sofia talked after a few moments of silence.

“Isaiah?”

“Yeah?”

For a while, Sofia didn’t say anything else, which was anything less than unusual for her. Only when she did speak did Isaiah sit up and lean his back against the wall.

“My mom said something.”

“What did she say?”

“She—.” Sofia cut herself short.

“Did she say something bad?”

“No, I—, I don’t think so. She just asked Uncle when you’d find a girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

“*Is* it bad?”

Isaiah didn’t— couldn’t answer. He wasn’t religious, dogmatic, and he didn’t see things like his preference as immoral; he never did, really. There was a certain expectation to being a man that he understood existed. Families expect girlfriends, wives, children consequentially—something to keep the family name going. When the son couldn’t provide that, what use was he?

He could’ve found himself a girlfriend, someone to love, eventually marry and have kids with, but his mind was a film strip jammed in the projector, playing the same scene over and over again until he’d eventually find a way to stop it.

He just hadn't figured that out yet.

“You don’t need to hide,” Sofia said, breaking him from his thoughts. “We don’t care about that stuff.”

“Sometimes others do, though. And that’s why people need to hide, Sofia.”

Sofia sighed. “I wish you didn’t have to.”

“Me too,” Isaiah whispered, just loud enough to be heard over his family’s laughter coming from the kitchen.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?” Sofia asked with all the curiosity of an intelligent girl her age.

Isaiah didn't *have* to answer the question— he was well within his right to deny Sofia the truth— but it felt odd pretending that what had happened didn’t; that Nick never existed, that the moments Isaiah shared with him were just figments of a clueless, immature imagination.

“Once,” he confessed, his voice hoarse and dry.

“What was his name?”

The name came easily to him, like it was second nature for Isaiah to remember it. Like he was cursed to know it for all of eternity, and, even on his deathbed, he’d think of the man’s name.

“Nick,” Isaiah said.

“What was he like?” Sofia didn’t sound shocked, or angry— she sounded like it was normal for someone like Isaiah to be like that. He expected worse, but he really shouldn’t have. Sofia was smart. She didn’t bend to the will of ignorance, she didn’t care for its hatred.

He thought about her question— *really* thought about it. What *was* Nick like?

Nick was rainy evenings in summer; warm, comfortable, and easy, but plagued with the knowledge that tomorrow he’d have to deal with the muddy aftermath. He was a loving cat; the gentleness of purrs and affection, though Isaiah would’ve been forever frightened of its claws and when it would decide to use them. He was the beauty of the Pennsylvania landscape; seeing it every day gave Isaiah the peace of mind he needed in his years of development, yet he knew one day he’d turn his back on it and never see the green mountains, the towering trees, the azure blue rivers again.

He was also a fucking asshole Isaiah wouldn’t mind slapping the shit out of after he pulled that little stunt and thinking he was cute with it, thinking Isaiah wouldn’t care. He cared a lot more than he should’ve.

But he knew, truly, that if he ever saw Nick again, he’d crumble into mourning ash. He probably couldn't even look him in the face.

“He was kind,” Isaiah said instead after the uncomfortably long pause.

“That’s it?”

“You’d think I was crazy if I kept going.”

“I think you’re crazy already,” she said.

Isaiah chuckled tiredly, and then he shook his head. The quieter thoughts rattled around in his mind. “I’d give anything to see him again.”

“You’re lazy.”

“Hey,” he barked out as quietly as he could as Sofia smothered her laughter. “It’s not as easy as you think.”

“Oh, *right*,” she muttered sarcastically.

“It is. I can’t just call him up and ask him to talk—.” Isaiah groaned. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you about this.”

“But you are. Why *don’t* you call him?”

“I don’t have his number. And he’s a Marine,” Isaiah added after a pause.

“Ah,” she hummed as if that made any sense to the logic of a seventeen-year-old who hadn’t experienced the beginnings of adulthood. “Why did you guys break up then?”

Isaiah rolled his eyes at her invasive questioning, but at least it wasn’t his aunt asking them. Her gossip found every corner of the world—she wouldn’t have let Isaiah live any of his secrets down if she knew about them.

“He joined the Marines.”

Sofia hissed painfully through clenched teeth.

“You see, It’s complicated,” Isaiah said. That was probably downplaying it, but, fuck, was it complicated.

“No shit,” Sophia murmured into the quiet.

“Language,” Isaiah warned, but there was no bite in the word. He couldn’t care less, and his fatigue was wearing him down.

“So, he was an asshole then.”

Isaiah laughed unexpectedly, scrubbing at his teary eyes. “Yeah, he was.”

“Do you have a photo of him?”

Isaiah frowned, and then shook his head. They’d never bothered to take photos. He was sure Lily had a dusty old camera she would’ve given up to the two of them, but they were more concerned about their relationship than they were of taking photos— Nick probably would’ve hated the idea anyway. But if Isaiah knew then that he’d never see Nick ever again, he would’ve taken them— he *should’ve* taken them. It’s that lapse in judgement where one believes that living in the moment is more crucial than capturing it in time— but without a photo, how was he supposed to remember those quiet moments in which he thought he fell in love?

“No,” he sighed.

The two of them were quiet for a while. Isaiah could hear the whirring of the cogs in Sofia’s mind as she tried to think of another question to ask. Her curiosity couldn’t be satiated.

“Why did he join the Marines?”

That was a question Isaiah had been trying to answer for five years. It was that impossible to even make up any reasoning for Nick’s decision that Isaiah believed Nick didn’t even know why himself. Maybe that was forward thinking. Maybe Nick knew all along, and Isaiah was just a victim of his own stupidity and wishfulness.

“I think he was scared,” Isaiah whispered.

“He shouldn’t have just left you though.”

“I know.” He didn’t. Some days he blamed himself for Nick’s leaving; he pushed him too far, wanted too much from him, didn’t give him time to adjust to the novelty of everything. Maybe Isaiah wanted Nick to be something he wasn’t; that line of thinking hurt him the most.

But Isaiah was new to it as well. He couldn’t tell his feelings from what half the time, jumbled in a big mess of emotions that he had rather thrown out than untangled. Nick wasn’t the only one in the relationship, he tried to tell himself. He just couldn’t make himself believe it.

When his great-uncle started yelling about Isaiah’s dad drinking the

rest of the rum, Isaiah turned his head to look at Sofia in the dark

“Go to sleep, okay?”

“Ugh, fine.”

Isaiah turned to face the wall, shoulders tensed and hunched inward. Somehow, Sofia had noticed his unease and sighed as loud as she could.

“What?” Isaiah muttered.

“If you do somehow end up seeing each other again, I want to meet him.”

Isaiah snorted. “Yeah, sure. I’ll drive him down to Atlanta just for you.”

“Okay, don’t do too much now.” Sofia laughed, before being interrupted by a rogue yawn. “Night, Isaiah.”

“G’night,” he mumbled into his pillow, clutching the thick blanket closer to himself.

The wintry cold had seeped through the window and cast its freeze upon Isaiah. He tried not to shiver, but it was ultimately impossible.

He was only able to fall asleep after the chatter in the kitchen dimmed, and his great-uncle stumbled into the living room, collapsing onto the couch with a dull thud; the sound was followed by a rhythmic snore.

Christmas Eve was a boring affair, but Sofia had become more talkative with Isaiah, and he couldn’t complain about that. She had more to say than he expected, and appreciated her silence-filling conversation than anything. It was better than drinking the loud quiet away with the bottle of rum his dad bought him— most of it was drunk by his dad and his uncle that night anyway.

What he was eager for was Christmas morning. The lights decorating the tree in the kitchen were kept on all night (“So Santa can find us!” Mateo had exclaimed) and stayed on until after the last presents were handed out.

With his stable paycheck, he was able to buy his dad a small stereo system— he tried not to think too much about Alex and Nick, and the

thumping techno in a dusty barn when he first saw the stereo in the shop's window— which he hugged Isaiah for. His mom got a stack of new release books he thought she'd like, and the Princess Diana Beanie Baby she really wanted for her collection. She lit up brighter than the Christmas tree when she unwrapped the plush bear.

"How did you get this?" She cried, latching onto Isaiah with a tight hug.

"It was really no trouble…"

"I love you so much, my baby."

Isaiah's aunt laughed at her outburst of happiness, but she had also cried when opening the present his mom got her.

Because he didn't want to spend too lavishly on the others, he bought his uncle and great-uncle alcohol, his aunt fairly affordable jewelry, and Sofia and Mateo a game for the Game Boy. Mateo seemed displeased about the choice— Kirby's Star Stacker—, but Sofia thanked him with a smile.

Isaiah got the usual; socks and shirts, a big bottle of tequila from his uncle to go along with the rum they drank last night, and a handmade postcard from Sofia he made sure to stick on the fridge.
Unsurprisingly, the best gift came from his mom. She smiled at him as he warily unwrapped the unmarked box. He laughed awkwardly when she bit back her own chuckle.

"You're making me nervous."

"Don't be," she said, which made him ten times more nervous than he already was.

When he pulled open the box, he thought he'd cry. Packaged nearly in a nest of paper confetti was a Canon branded box.

"You got me a camera?" He looked up at his mom with teary eyes.

She nodded, and he lunged to pull her into an embrace tighter than the one she had given him.

Sofia was smiling at Isaiah when he pulled back. Her eyebrows rose in a gesture that said, '*well, there you go*.' He tried not to roll his eyes.

The Canon box was heavy in his hands, and his grin grew wider in

excitement as he opened it and pulled out the digital camera. He ran as fast as he could to find some batteries to charge it, and when it was powered on, his family gathered into a crowd in front of the tree for a photo. It came out perfectly, and he found himself smiling like an idiot at the screen.

“Thank you, mom,” Isaiah said, hugging her once more.

“It was really no trouble,” she echoed him, and laughed as he glared at her lightheartedly.

After all the presents were handed out, Isaiah’s mom called for a walk in the park. It was still a chilly morning, but no colder than the night Isaiah had snuck out for a moment of air. Isaiah’s aunt and dad stayed back to cook lunch. Mateo stayed as well, complaining about his jacket being too hot… sure, whatever.

Sofia stuck by Isaiah’s side as he talked with his mom, chatting about work and not much else.

Ever since he’d graduated and moved to Philly, his social life never picked back up. Being isolated from his friends back in Baltimore had subdued any semblance of companionship he once pursued. He didn’t feel the urge to go out and find someone to talk with and connect to. He had his work acquaintances, and he was fine keeping them at an arms length and far from the status of friendship— he liked Cameron and Ochoa enough, but not in that way.

“You should get out more. It’s good to meet new people,” his mom suggested, but he just responded with a noncommittal shrug.

He wasn’t bound to relationships anymore— or, at least, he didn’t let himself be bound by them. The suffering of love was stronger than the comfort of it.

His extended family left after a big lunch of pernil leftovers, the pasteles his dad was finally able to order, and fragrant Hoppin’ John. He said a somber goodbye to Sofia and the family he grew to not mind all that much— Christmas hadn’t been as bad as the last few, he’d admit.

In the quiet of the amber evening, his mom embraced him and kissed his cheek.

“Call me if you need anything, okay?” His mom said, curling a coil of

hair around her manicured finger. He nodded, pressing his lipstick-stained cheek against her temple. “You’re still my baby, even if you’re grown now.”

Though she chuckled, her voice was strained and tired. If she were to cry and tremble, Isaiah wouldn’t have been entirely surprised. She was always quite saddened about his aging like all mothers, he supposed. Watching the boy she raised grow into a man, knowing that she hadn’t failed in the aspect of nurturing him. He was thankful for her, always — he’d never deny her that honor and respect.

He traced his hand through her relaxed hair with a smile, and unwrapped his arms from around her.

“You better make good use of that camera, Izzy.” She pointed a finger at him with a daring glare. “And I expect to see photos next time I visit.”

He laughed, but his throat tightened around each exhale of air. Tears threatened to spill, burning his waterline with hot saltiness.

“Yes, mama.”

Her hand dropped and she looked at him with that knowing gaze all mothers possessed; when they try to tell their children something in the shining irises of their squinted eyes and furrowed brows. What she was saying, Isaiah didn’t want to hear.

Try. Try for me, even when you don’t want to try for yourself.

Isaiah nodded shakily, which was all he could give her.

Taking it for what it was worth, his mom nodded back and patted his cheek.

“Goodbye, my baby.”

“Bye, mama,” he croaked, mouth and eyes wet.

She turned away from him— he was glad she did so— and thanked his dad for opening the car door for her. She didn’t look back at him once, even when his dad hugged him goodbye.

Watching them go was almost heartbreaking. It wasn’t like when he held the cold plastic of the receiver to his face, and closed his eyes against the voice of Nick, trying his hardest not to imagine Nick’s

boyish face split into a grin as he held Isaiah in his arms.

No, it wasn't that kind of goodbye.

It was the goodbye Isaiah deserved; one that promised life after, another hello when they met again. Not one that pledged in the depths of the words that they'd never see each other after that. Not one that hurt him more than it should've.

New Years was celebrated with beers on Cameron's fire escape as they watched drunk people countdown to a new day with all the cheer they could muster through the haze of alcohol. Isaiah tried to not get too drunk that night, but the beers Cameron drank were a finer brand, better quality, and went down his throat smoother. And they didn't taste like shit.

He didn't mind hanging out with Cameron. He was nicer of a person than Isaiah first thought; putting other people first, especially at work, and generally being a good support for Isaiah if he ever wanted to talk — not that he did. He wasn't as much of a talker as Cameron was, and Cameron didn't need to know about his personal life and the happenings in it, but that offer to talk was still on the table whether or not Isaiah took it.

Even if Isaiah had never outright told Cameron he was gay— or gay adjacent, whatever they were calling it those days—, he thought Cameron figured it out, or could've, at least. It was still refreshing to be able to relax outside of his masculinity when he was with Cameron since Isaiah thought he was queer too— but a different kind of queer than what Isaiah was.

Cameron was feminine, pretty, more woman than man. They drank into the night; sometimes Cameron took him out to gay bars every so often. He liked to make Isaiah watch weird films about queers, and aliens, and suicidal queers with aliens. Most of the pop culture references in the films went over Isaiah's head, and Cameron always groaned and explained each one thoroughly until Isaiah could quote him from reference. Any time a male actor was on screen, Cameron would glance at him with a look. If he was smart, Isaiah would've thought Cameron was trying to gauge his type.

Maybe he was.

Isaiah didn't even know if he had a type— he hadn't really thought about it that much. Big guys, maybe; the ones he could throw around

despite their brawniness, and fuck until they were a whimpering mess. The guys he could break with his mouth, the guys who would beg and cry, and thank Isaiah for taking such good care of them.

He wanted the ones who couldn't fasten the last two buttons of their shirts, the ones with big thighs he could kneel between, the ones that looked at him like he was beauty incarnate in the moments where he felt less than.

Yeah, sure, that was his type.

Thankfully, Cameron never pried, nor asked. Even if he liked to ask deep questions, he knew where boundaries lied and never threatened them. Isaiah might've considered Cameron a friend if they hadn't met through work. He was just happy enough to have someone to hang out with when he didn't have work to stress over.

After New Years, they were back at work. Isaiah was, at least. His coworkers complained about working over the holiday break, and Isaiah had to stamp down the embers of guilt he felt over taking the time off instead of them. He told himself that if they wanted the time off, they would've put in for it. He felt even more selfish for thinking that.

Isaiah liked his job at City Hall. The building was beautiful, something out of an architecture's wet dream with marble masonry, tall, chandeliered roofs, and rooms he felt too inexperienced to stand in. He'd taken the guided tour at least five times, and he still felt like he was finding new things to see whenever he walked the quiet halls. The paintings on the walls, the little details in the decorative trim; not to mention the perfect view of the city from the tower.

But, because of work, he was stuck inside his tiny office most of the time. He and his computer had grown attached; half of his work days were spent reading and sending emails about potential interns, audits, and answering thankfully rare complaints or questions.

Even if he was in there all day, the least he could do was make his office his own with photos of him and his parents, and little trinkets and art works he'd been given from his coworker's children.

He was also blessed with a perfect view of the inner courtyard; sometimes he would roll his chair over to his window and people-watch as tourists and city workers ambled about the plaza. He loved the architecture of the courtyard too; the inlaid compass rose,

coloured with the blues of the sea and the sun setting over it, the leafless maples planted in each corner, and the coffee stand guy who Isaiah thought was more handsome than he dared to be.

It was prettier in summer.

Isaiah yearned for the days he would sit on the short garden walls, his lunch sitting beside him and a to-go coffee cup in hand.

In winter, the ground was damp with freshly shovelled snow, and the walkways connecting the outside street to the courtyard were perfect for a freezing breeze to drift through.

One day, he'd sit in the plaza again, unashamedly blush at the coffee stand guy's blatant flirting, and relish in the warmth and freedom of the non-winter seasons.

Cameron had come into his office on Thursday, brought him coffee, and chatted for a while. As always, Cameron had off-the-record complaints about his coworkers, griping about how boring and rude they were over the smallest of things.

Sometimes Isaiah questioned why Cameron was so calm while complaining about his coworkers to a Human Resources representative— if it were Isaiah, he'd be quaking in his boots, wondering whether or not the rep would actually report it or not.

Thankfully for Cameron, Isaiah took reports circumstantially and not because someone needed to lift a weight off their shoulders through mindless ranting. He wished he had someone like that; someone to go to when his mind was overloaded with irritation and anxiety. Though he could talk to Cameron, with the amount of gossip he heard from the guy, he really didn't trust him in the slightest. His mom had told him to call her whenever, but he didn't think that meant when he had a little issue that could be resolved in another way.

Other than them, who else was there?

"Me and Ochoa from Revenue were going out tomorrow night," Cameron said when he was nearly done with his coffee.

When Cameron didn't say anything else, Isaiah looked up at him from his computer screen.

"You're inviting me?"

“Duh,” Cameron snorted. “Why else would I tell you that?”

“I dunno… I–.”

“Come on, Isaiah. You’re always either at work or at home.” He frowned, then added, “Or at my place. You need to get out more.”

Isaiah shrugged at Cameron’s exasperated sigh. He wasn’t wrong– they both knew that, but Isaiah wouldn’t admit it. He wouldn’t admit a lot of things, even if he was on his deathbed, he noticed.

“I’ll pay for your drinks,” Cameron offered, widening his pleading eyes in that way that reminded him of someone else with Isaiah’s smoke in their mouth.

He looked away, and scratched at his jaw while thinking; the stubble was irritating him, but he’d been too lazy to shave that morning. He really couldn’t turn down free drinks on a Saturday, could he? And if it made Cameron relent, he’d agree. Isaiah sighed, and nodded.

“Awesome!” Cameron grinned.

He reached over Isaiah’s desk and snatched a pad of sticky-notes, and scribbled an address on the top one. When Cameron handed it back, Isaiah recognized the address. It was a gay bar Cameron had taken him to once with, again, the promise of free drinks. The place was quiet, a little dingy, which Isaiah preferred. If anyone were to see him, they’d been there for the same reason.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?” Cameron stood, gathering his coat and throwing his to-go cup into the trash can by the door.

“Yeah, sure.”

“You better be there, Nash, or you don’t get to see the ending of The Living End,” Cameron threatened halfheartedly.

“Oh, no.” Isaiah clasped his hand over his heart, feigning a wound and a grimace. “What ever will I do?”

Cameron snorted and pulled the office door open. “Cya, lover boy.”

“Cya, punk,” Isaiah called out as Cameron closed the door, his figure disappearing from behind the frosted glass.

Once he was sure Cameron was gone, Isaiah exhaled and leaned back in his chair. Talking to people was exhausting, and he didn’t know

when it had started to be.

The rest of Isaiah's day was spent at his desk, going cross-eyed from staring at documents he didn't care about and pages of the employee handbook he had to rewrite. It was all boring business; Isaiah was glad it paid well because he didn't know what else he'd do if it didn't.

Thankfully, it was half-past-five and he only had a couple papers to take home and pour over with a glass of gifted rum and oily takeout.

Isaiah had expected adulthood to be more… fulfilling. When he was nineteen, he thought he had so much more life to experience. Now, he was lucky to even have the energy to roll his monthly joint or go to the beach when the weather was good enough. He wasn't sure if he was just drained, tired, or bored of life. Fuck, maybe all three.

What a fucking future he thought he'd have. Younger Isaiah was a douche and a half to think that he'd peak later in life.

At least it wasn't *too* bad. He still had that promised freedom— he really could do whatever he wanted, but that wall of fatigue and laziness was too high to look over. He wasn't sure when the wall would break down, or when he'd be tall enough to climb over it.

Isaiah gathered up his papers, pocketed his work phone, and slung his much-too-full messenger bag over his shoulder. He needed another coffee, and maybe for the coffee stand guy to flirt with him a bit— he was still waiting for that perfect moment for either Isaiah or the coffee shop guy to go further than baseline flirting; a date would probably settle the slump he'd been in since college, and, if it didn't, at least he tried.

He took the stairs two steps at a time, praying to whatever force holding his destiny in hand that the coffee shop guy was working that afternoon. The courtyard was empty when he burst through the doors. The snow had been shovelled, and left the ground slightly damp, leaving the compass rose to glitter in the spotty sunlight.

The coffee stand was empty, the shutter pulled down. Isaiah sighed, calming his beating heart with a flush of disappointment. What a big fuck-you it was. He couldn't even get his coffee cheap, hot, and bitter; the coffee shop around the corner just didn't do it as black as he wanted, and they didn't have a hot guy that smiled whenever he saw Isaiah walking through the plaza.

He grumbled, mostly to himself, but also to that force that he swore was sardonically listening to him.

Whatever. He had the alluring promise of Chinese takeout and alcohol so strong it could knock out a horse to give him company that evening. He adjusted his slipping hold on the sheaths of paper in his arms, and continued walking through the plaza. The heels of his loafers clicked against the flawless masonry of the compass rose.

His work phone buzzed in his pocket— the biblical warning of a threatening message from his boss— and he shuffled his stuff into one arm to free his hand. He pulled his phone out from his pocket and flipped it open without even breaking stride.

One moment, he had a secure hold on his stance, papers, and his phone with an intimidating message he had to squint to read, and the next, he was stumbling as his shit went sprawling across the wet ground.

“Shit!” he shouted, voice echoing in the confines of the plaza, when he caught himself with his outstretched arms and cold-bitten palms. His knees hit the ground and his joints cracked with the deafening crunch of age.

“Fuck, sorry.”

Whoever it was that bumped into him, towered over his bent form apologetically. Isaiah’s glare shifted from his dampening papers to the person standing above him. The sun cast its rays atop the plaza and Isaiah had to squint against the blinding light. A man stood there, shoulders hunched and face obscured by blurry shadow. There was something clenched in his shaking fist.

“Do you ever watch where you’re going?” Isaiah spat, turning back to his papers and attempting to gather up what wasn’t soaked through. He’d have to reprint most of them, and he really didn’t want to go back into the office for that. “Fucking asshole,” he grumbled.

“I—.” The man stepped back. Of course, the motherfucker wouldn’t even help Isaiah pick up his papers. “Holy shit,” the guy murmured, his voice shakier than his balled up fists.

Isaiah frowned, and sat back on his haunches, soggy paper in hand. Familiarity cut through the space between them; that warmly rough voice, those skin-burst-scarred knuckles. Isaiah’s chest constricted as he looked back up at the guy, holding a hand to his brow to block the

light.

Isaiah swore he felt the Earth stop spinning. It was theoretically impossible to reverse the trajectory of planetary orbit, but science deemed it feasible for only just a second— a second that stretched on to be a minute, to be an hour, to be a lifetime.

The man's face didn't move from its slacked shock— in fact, nothing did. The birds circling above stopped midflight, wide, black wings paused in motion. The light that hid them from the heavens sheltered them in halted movement. Isaiah's muscles were locked, hand held over his brow and the other clenching the wet paper in his tensed fist, and he could nearly speak if he just forced his voice to work.

"Nick?"

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